Student career competence: the contribution of career conversations

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This paper presents the findings of seven related pieces of research conducted over the past four years at 2 universities in the Netherlands. It focuses on the elements that contribute most to the development of student career management competencies and finishes with a summary of what does and doesn't contribute to career competence.

In the Netherlands, as in other countries, globalisation, the speed of change in knowledge and technology and changing labour markets mean workers need to manage their own career journeys, be self-directed and self-managing.   But students are reported leaving education with low motivation and lacking the kinds of competencies to manage these changes (Winters et al., 2012). Europe has responded to this problem in part with policies to do with lifelong learning and a renewed focus on equipping young people with career management competencies. The Dutch government has identified three career competencies, with all teachers in schools aiming to develop these in students, although integrated career guidance is at this stage voluntary. These competencies are "career reflection" (on motives, values, talents, ambitions, reflective behaviour), "Career shaping" or "Career forming" (proactivity, active investigation and exploration, taking action" and Networking (interactive in relation to their career, building and maintaining networks.)

In New Zealand the Ministry of Education requires secondary schools through NAG 1(f), NEG 1 and NEG 3 to provide….. appropriate career education and guidance for all students in year 7 and above….. and enable…..all students to realise their full potential as individuals….. and to develop …..knowledge, understanding and skills needed by New Zealanders to compete successfully in the modern, ever-changing world (Ministry of Education 2013) .   In response, Careers NZ has rolled out three sets of career education benchmarks over the past few years targeting careers education and development at secondary school, higher education and at pre-secondary schooling . The aim of the benchmarks is to ensure all students leave secondary and tertiary education with sound career management competencies. Part of achieving this is schools taking an integrated approach to student career development, with responsibility being spread across the school and being embedded in learning and teaching.

While the NZ career management competencies do not have the easy to recall titles of the Dutch ones, the overlap in meaning is obvious, with the exception of the explicit focus on networking in the Dutch ones. The NZ Career Development Benchmarks are a comprehensive guide to best practice, in integrated career education but are a voluntary self-review and do not give direction about how to enable students to develop career competencies.

Over the past 4 years intensive research has been done in the Netherlands by overlapping research teams in The Hague University and Eindhoven School of Education into contributing factors, interventions and activities that help with the development of career competencies. This has resulted in at least seven pieces of related research about what is and isn't helpful.

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The career conversations between secondary school teachers and students secondary vocational schools

In 2010 Mittendorf and her colleagues published research that examined the career conversations that took place between secondary school teachers and students in competence-based secondary vocational schools . In the Dutch education system post-primary education is split into three modes of secondary schooling: University Preparatory Education, Senior General Secondary Education and Preparatory Vocational Secondary Education that aims to prepare students for either the labour market or secondary vocational education (Wikipedia 2013) They observed and analysed 32 conversations for four elements: content, teacher activities, student activities and the relationship between student and teacher.

They found that although the conversations were supposed to be about the student's career development the conversations were often focussed on school issues or the technical aspects of activities like Professional Development Plans. There was little discussion of the student's career issues and little attempt to help the student make meaning of their observations and experiences. There was relatively little done to stimulate reflection and self-directedness. Feedback was rarely provided and questions were mostly aimed at obtaining information rather than helping the student reflect. In addition many of the teachers were found to act in a "dominant" manner (Wubbels et al, 2006)

Student perceptions of their career conversations with their teachers in senior secondary vocational schools

Mittendorf and her team followed this up in 2011 with research into student perceptions of their career conversations with their teachers (Mittendorf et al., 2011). This time they surveyed 579 students and 28 teachers in 4 senior secondary vocational schools using a questionnaire based on the 2010 research findings using the categories content, teacher activities, student activities and the nature of the interpersonal relationship. All the teachers had limited experience of career guidance but all had had short in-service training.

Once again they found that the content was not always related to career development, that is to stimulating the students to think about themselves, their future and their plans. All students rated teachers low on "talking about career issues" and more likely to talk about school subjects, academic progress and action plans. Once again feedback was rarely provided and the experiences of the students rarely used. Content was more about giving instructions or the technical aspects of using an instrument, with little done to initiate dialogue, stimulate reflection, create meaning or stimulate agency or self-directedness. Again many teachers were found to act in a dominant manner, although there were many differences between teachers.

The influence of teachers' career guidance profiles on students' career competencies in secondary vocational schools

Mittendorf et al then researched in 2012 the influence of teachers' career guidance profiles on students' career competencies, building on their previous research that looked at the content of conversations, the activities undertaken and the nature of the relationship with the teacher. They

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surveyed 579 students from four different courses in four secondary vocational schools using a questionnaire to capture students' perceptions of their teachers' career guidance, Students' career competencies, and demographic information along with their locus of control and decision-making self-efficacy.

They found that while there were differences in the ways teachers guide students, teachers' approaches only partly related to differences in career competencies, with the biggest impact on career reflection. In spite of differences between teachers, all teachers focussed less attention on discussing career issues (e.g. future ambitions, stimulating self-directedness, making meaning) than any other aspect of career development. They found that individual differences between students are of greater influence on developing career competencies than the guidance style of the teacher.

The relationship between the learning environment and career competencies

In 2011 Kuipers et al studied the relationship between the learning environment and career competencies of 3499 students in 226 classes in 34 prevocational and secondary vocational schools. They hypothesised that career related programme organisation that is practice- and inquiry-based advances the use of career competencies by students (career reflection, career forming, networking), that career dialogue contributes to the use of career competencies by students more than traditional career guidance and that career dialogue contributes more to the use of career competencies by student than personal factors.

They found that problem-based discussions were beneficial for all 3 competency outcomes (career reflection, career forming, networking). There was no evidence that career tests contributed to students' career competencies and that other instruments e.g. portfolios and PDPs, had little effect, although making use of a PDP (Professional Development Plan)related to taking more action. The form of the discussion and the role of the person that led the conversation does not appear to contribute significantly to the development and use of competencies however the content of the conversation did. Career dialogues either in school or in work experience were significantly beneficial for all outcomes and dialogue was more strongly correlated with the development of career competencies than personal factors and personality traits (eg gender, locus of control). In addition they found that students who do more work placements give more direction to their careers. They conclude that "Career guidance in school in which a dialogue takes place about concrete experiences and which is focused on the future contributes most to the presence of career competencies."

Aspects of the learning environment that correspond with the development of career competencies among university students

Kuijpers and Meijers (2012) then investigated which aspects of the learning environment aimed at fostering career learning corresponded with the development of career competencies among university students. They looked at the organisation of programmes (internship, practice-based, inquiry-based) and the form, content and quantity of career dialogues and whether they were student led, with the personal and situational factors of students (gender, age, ethnicity, previous education, learning achievement, internal locus of control, specialization and study year) and the effect these had on the use of career competencies. Using a questionnaire they surveyed 4820

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mostly 2nd and 3rd year students and 371 career counsellors in 11 universities to find out to what extent the learning environment universities offer their students is career oriented and which aspects of the learning environment are related to the use of career competencies by students. They used four career competencies identified by Kuijpers and Scheerens (2006); career reflecting and networking in keeping with other studies but with the career forming competency split into work exploration and career action.

They found some significant learning environment variables that contributed to competency use. In particular they found that practice- and inquiry-based learning, student led, reflective conversations that stimulate action, and conversations that focused on the student and their visions for the future had a significant impact. Career dialogue was more influential on career competencies than personal factors were. Different personal and situational factors differentially impacted which competencies were developed. The number of career conversations students had was linked to career action while conversations about academic progression were negatively related to career action. "Helping" kinds of conversations (versus reflective conversations) and discussions about educational progress were both negatively related to the use of career competencies..

The relationship between career competencies and career identity, motivation and quality of choice of prevocational and vocational secondary school students

In 2013 Meijers et al (2013) examined the relationship between career competencies (career behaviour) and career identity, motivation and quality of choice of prevocational and vocational secondary school students. Using a questionnaire that measured these factors as well as personal and situational factors they surveyed 3,499 twelve to nineteen year old students in 34 prevocational and vocational secondary schools, as well as 166 teachers. They utilised Kuijpers and Scheerens' (2006) four career competencies: career reflecting, work exploration and career action (career forming) and networking.

The findings suggest that the development of career competencies has multiple beneficial impacts for students that go beyond traditional measures of career development like decision making skills and career knowledge. The researchers reported that conversations with students at school and the workplace about their aptitudes, motives and future career contributed positively to career identity, learning motivation, and suitable choices of learning task and type of study. Career competencies also contributed positively to learning motivation, quality of study choice, fitness of choice of learning tasks and internship. Career identity in turn positively contributed to career forming and networking.

They found that career interventions that lacked dialogue did not contribute to career identity, learning motivation or experienced fit between aptitudes and choices for work placements and study. The form of the conversation and the role of the person who led it were less important to learning and career outcomes than the content of the conversation.

Interestingly the researchers found a negative relationship between career tests and career identity and no evidence that they contributed to suitable choices. Using instruments like portfolios and PDPs was found to have no impact.

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Students who had more experience with work placements experienced a better fit between their aptitudes and their work placements, and more fruitful career conversations. A dialogue about these experiences, particularly with teachers and in the workplace with professionals (constructivist) was positively linked to the research variables. The authors concluded that a curriculum that it practice and inquiry-based explained the experienced fit of choice of learning tasks and study.

Training teachers

Traditionally in NZ, career conversations have been left to career practitioners – career counsellors in tertiary education, career advisors in secondary schools. However the new Career Development Benchmarks (Careers New Zealand 2013), recent research into best practice in NZ secondary schools (Furbish and Reid 2013) and the New Zealand Ministry of Education advocate a whole of school approach and suggest all teachers discuss careers with students. The research presented in this paper suggests that a strong career learning environment depends on the ability of teachers and others to conduct meaningful dialogue. This new role presents a challenge to the professional identity of teachers as well as raises issues about the level of skill and knowledge they require.

Winters et al (2012) initiated an explorative study into whether training teachers can stimulate the kinds of career learning conversations that seem so beneficial to developing career competence. They analysed career conversations conducted by teachers in secondary vocational education after a teacher training intervention of a minimum of two four-hour training sessions plus an individual coaching session. The research analysed the differences between the career conversations teachers had with students before their training and the conversations they had after.

The research looked at three groups of teachers: a control group who had not undertaken the training, the experimental group who had undertaken the training, and the design group, teachers who designed the training. They found that the biggest change in conversation quality was in the teachers who designed the training. Of the three groups, the "design" group did better than the experimental group who did better than the control group in terms of stimulating and improving career learning.

Winters et al (2012) recommend that effective training for teachers focus on discussion about career learning and reflection on experience, that teachers are actively involved and have the opportunity to make elements of training their own (rather than top down training design) and are given time to incorporate behaviour changes. They suggest that this approach echoes the kinds of interventions that have been shown to help students use career competencies. It is not yet clear what length and intensity of training is optimum.

Summary of the research

There was no evidence in these research projects that the following are helpful in developing career competencies: career tests, other instruments such as portfolios, the more traditional approach of career activities with an absence of dialogue, speaking to and about students, monologue (lecturing), discussions that do not focus on reflection or meaning-making, or conversations about

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educational progression, other school issues or technical aspects of using career development instruments.

What appeared to contribute most strongly to the development and use of career competencies was dialogue, problem-based discussion that focused on meaning-making and reflection and conversations about self and visualising the future. Work placements and work experience led to the development and use of career competencies. The more workplace experience students had, the better decisions they made. There was also evidence of the positive impact of students having some influence over what they learn. Teachers seemed to respond positively to the same mechanisms that their students did; being involved in designing their own training and reflecting on experience.

Kuijpers and Meijers(2012) recommend career-related programmes that are practice- and inquiry-based , using career dialogue that constructs and attributes meaning and giving the opportunity for experiences in relevant professional practice in a way that reveals the demands, culture and developments in the profession, giving students some influence on how and what they learn and having fewer helping conversations and more activating and reflective conversations – the kind in which they make key contributions and includes images of self and futures and ideas about concrete actions they can take.

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